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ABSTRACT

Physical education today is a discipline defined by men and seen largely as a male domain in which women are regarded as physically inferior. The dominant male ideology has established the physical standards for women which has the effect of preventing most women from feeling good about their bodies. With the recent rapid growth of women's athletics, however, the patriarchy has been less successful in controlling female sports. Physical educators should encourage female college students to take up physical activity and to compete in organized sport. New curricula in physical education need to be developed to encourage women to take control of their bodies and should include such topics as body awareness, the connections between body and mind, sexuality, nutrition, health and hygiene, and stress management. Wellesley College, Massachusetts, includes a one-year physical education requirement with the curriculum focusing on skill classes such as self-defense and yoga, as well as such topics as first aid and sports medicine. Physical education should be redefined to recognize its importance to feminist goals. Includes 13 references. (LPT)

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Sukie Magraw

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Feminists in women's studies are taking a new look at history and literature and psychology. They are redefining art and the sciences. It is time for feminists to redefine and recognize the importance of physical education to feminist goals.

The major goal of feminism is for women to realize their potential as human beings. In order to achieve this goal it is essential that women feel good about themselves, an integral part of which is feeling good about their bodies. For too long women's bodies have been objectified, devalued, and ridiculed by soiety at large and, sadly, by women themselves. If we view our bodies as ugly and weak, how then do we view ourselves?

As it presently exists, physical education is a discipline defined by men, seen largely as a male domain. It is an arena for competition where cooperation is used as a means to an end: winning, and affiliation is strong precisely because it heightens separation and division among groups. My field is one in which women are defined to be physically inferior, just as in academic disciplines women have been defined as mentally inferior.

In this paper I want to take a closer look at women's estrangement from their bodies. Then I will turn to physical education and discuss what we physical educators should be doing to combat this estrangement, and how, in so doing, we must redefine the words "physical education". Finally, I will question the supposed physical inferiority of women to men, and suggest that the "weaker sex" is not necessarily weaker.

In February of 1984 Glamour magazine published a survey of how 33,000 women felt about their bodies. The questionnaire was filled out by a self-selected portion of Glamour readers, but their findings are in line with other more scientifically conducted studies. Glamour found that a scant 6 % of the women surveyed are "very happy" with their bodies.[1]

Women are pressured to conform to a culturally prescribed standard of beauty and attractiveness. Interestingly, the standard of beauty - although a woman can point to it in others - is elusive, and for most women seems impossible to attain. The societal message is: changes are always necessary. A woman can never be satisfied with what she has or is, because that is next to nothing. For instance, her face: it does not look good enough as it is. She needs foundation make-up and blush and eyeliner and

mascara and eyeshadow and the list goes on, all in many shades, bringing out the best in her!, all promising to bring her closer to that elusive standard of beauty. Deodorants are another example of the same societal message, informing a woman that her own body odor is unattractive and unacceptable; it is better to mask it with a synthetic one. The most telling of these deodorants are the "feminine hygeine" sprays used to cover up genital odors. Many of these products are unhealthy, even dangerous, but that is overlooked in the quest for attractiveness. Again, the implicit message is that a woman "as is" is deficient in very important ways.

Enormous pressure has been put on women to conform to a culturally prescribed standard of weight. To be attractive, today's woman must be small and thin. Because most women are not small and thin, or if they are they don't feel small and thin enough, most women, over 88 %, are dieters. Three quarters of the women in the Glamour survey said they are "too fat" despite standard height/weight tables indicating that only one quarter are "overweight". Women who are overweight feel the most shame and have the most negative feelings about their bodies. "More that three quarters feel anxious, depressed, or repulsed when confronting a mirror".[2]

"Normal" weight people don't feel much better about themselves. They, too, feel they are too fat, and to many, weight is one of the most salient issues of their lives. When asked, "What would make you happiest", 42 % said "losing weight", as opposed to "success at work", 22 %; "a date with a man I admire", 21 %; or "hearing from an old friend", 15 %. As Dr. Susan Wooley, one of the Glamour researchers, said, "What we see is a steadily growing cultural bias - almost no woman of whatever size feels she's thin enough".[3]

In general, health is not the motivating force behind dieting. The Harvard Medical School Health Letter as quoted by Kim Chernin in her book The Obsession states, "For many being thin is a cosmetic rather than a health goal".[4] If it were, perhaps there would be more concern over the dangers of dieting itself: "the chronic fatigue, irritability, tension, inability to concentrate which effects chronic dieters, ... the danger to the heart in losing or gaining more than 10 pounds a year, ... and the potential electrolyte imbalances".[5] Who is it that diets? It's no surprise that 95 % of the weight loss clinic clientele is female, that 90 % of all anorexics

are female, that almost all bulmarexics are female.

The pressure to be attractive is extreme, and when all else fails women go to extremes: they try surgery. Every year over 300,000 women have their breasts enlarged or reduced. Every year thousands of buttocks, thighs, and stomachs are surgically reduced, and faces are "lifted".

The prevailing standard of attractiveness is not just elusive, it is also "be-littling" of women. It minimizes them. It confines them, as do the dresses and the high heeled shoes that women wear. Is this confinement and belittling accidental? Why is it that the societal standard of attractiveness for women is one of petitness?

Throughout history men have controlled women's bodies by physically objectifying them. In the past this objectification was linked to childbearing suitabiliities; now it is linked to attractiveness, particularly sexual attractiveness. Attractiveness is an external standard. It is a judgement of others, of the dominant male ideology. Those making the judgement are the ones who have control. Additionally, men's control extends beyond judgements. A woman's body is not safe, it does not really belong to her when she knows she is at the mercy of any man walking down the street, indeed of any man living in her house. Those with supposed physical superiority again have control.

The medical profession, a field dominated by males, has historically acted in complicity with the prevailing ideology, going so far as to proclaim menstruation to be "pathological", in fact identifying all female functions as "inherently sick".[6] As Ehrenreich and English point out in Complaints and Disorders, "What is amazing about medical 'science' as it relates to women is that the theories change so neatly to fit the needs of the dominant male ideology".[7]

In the late 1800's female invalidism pervaded upper and upper middle class society. Women of these classes who felt any sort of malaise were deemed invalids. Rest was prescribed; they were sent to bed. They were not to exercise or read or write. Medical wisdom to the day was based on the physiological law of conservation of energy. To save as much energy as possible for childbearing, women were admonished to avoid energy draining activities. Indeed one of the arguments against educating women was that

strenuous studying would deplete their energy supplies and make them unfit mothers. Nevertheless, some women did go to college, and then medical "wisdom" flipflopped. The conservation of energy law was abandoned. It was decided that in order for a young woman to survive the rigors of study without withering her womb she would have to have a strong constitution. Thus, a daily regimen of physical activity was incorporated into the curricula of women's colleges.

The dominant male ideology has set the physical standards for women. These standards have been set in such a way that women are deemed inferior and deficient. Naturally women don't feel good about themselves. Recently women have become more interested in exercise. They dance, jog, swim, play tennis. Is this increased activity indicative of a positive body image? Unfortunately, usually not. Many women are using these exercises as the hopeful vehicle to attractiveness. Even those who do some weight lifting are often in search of a new standard of attractiveness; lean, muscular, broad shouldered, and narrow hipped; they aspire to transform their bodies into that of an adolescent male!

Dominant male ideology, patriarchy, has made a huge investment in keeping women from feeling good about their bodies. Kim Chernin writes:

> When we see another calorie counter, read another wonder diet book, pick up another low-cal cottage cheese, we must begin to understand these trivial items symbolically and realize that what we are purchasing is the covert advice not to grow too large or too powerful for our culture.[8]

If women do not feel good about their bodies, what does that mean about how they feel about the rest of themselves? The Glamour survey found that 96% of the women felt that their weight affected their feelings about themselves.[9] Glamour is not alone. Many studies point to a strong connection between body image and self esteem; as body image becomes more positive, self esteem rises.

If this connection is so clear, why isn't our whole society promoting a positive body image for everyone? Why is it that the dominant male ideology is one that systematically derides women? What does the patriarchy gain in so heavily promoting certain images of women, in setting standards

that promise failure, that do their best to confine, constrict, belittle and minimize women? The patriarchy has manipulated and stripped away from women that which is rightfully theirs - their bodies. Could the patriarchy feel threatened by women's bodies: by their life-bearing abilities, by their strength? What would happen if women felt good about their bodies, if women took pride and joy in their bodies, if women felt strong? I believe that then women would feel the equals of men, and men would be forced to accept a new standard - of equality.

Our charge as physical educators is becoming clear. We must work to physically educate women to feel good about their bodies, to claim them as their own, to feel their own strength.

The field of physical education has not been very receptive to women. "Traditionally sport has been a patriarchal institution celebrating masculine power, values and behavior, created and shaped without regard to the existence or involvement of women".[10]

Historically, women have been kept out of sports - from the 5th Century B.C. when a woman who was found even observing Greek athletic games was subject to death, to modern times when in 1967 an attempt was made to bodily throw "K Switzer" off the Boston Marathon course because she was female.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association for years refused requests to include women's programs in their organization. The NCAA lobbied Congress against Title IX which mandated more parity in male and female athletic programs. When Title IX passed and females became involved in sports in larger numbers than ever before, then the NCAA became interested in women. This interest manifested itself in the NCAA take-over of the national women's organization, the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women.

Now that women's athletics is growing in appeal, the phenomenon of male usurpation is also evident locally. Despite the enormous increase of female athletic participation between 1975 and 1980, there was a sharp decline in the number of female head coaches of women's collegiate athletic teams. Concomitant with this was a huge increase, 137 %, in the number of male head coaches for women's teams."

The patriarchy has wanted to keep women out of sports, and it has. But recently it has been less successful so it is doing the next best thing, it is attempting to control female sports. We physical educators must encourage girls to take up physical activity, to become members of teams, to compete in organized sport. We must encourage any pursuits that will foster pride in a woman's body and physical prowess.

We physical educators must also take a very close look at traditional avenues of physical activity. Traditional sport embodies the tenets of the dominant male ideology: aggression, domination, competition and control. These are all useful traits for "making it" in a male world. In The Managerial Woman Hennig and Jardim argue that women have a hard time in management precisely because the business world is run like organized sport. And women who have not been on teams, who haven't played "hardball", are at a distinct disadvantage: they don't know how to play the game.[12]

Although most women haven't played managerial hardball, women have their own strengths which are all too often overlooked. A theme paper at The New Agenda Conference: A Blueprint for the Future of Women's Sports put it this way.

> This masculine structure of sport has not been challenged by the entrance of females who have been co-opted by the existing establishment and absorbed into the male dominated system. Rather than change to fit into the male model of sport, females should be using their unique qualities to transform sport into an experience that will contribute to the growth and development of behavior and values that are positive for both sexes. Traditional expressive feminine behaviors such as caring, sharing and compassion can add a new dimension to sport for both males and females.[13]

Here at Wellesley College there is a physical education requirement. Each student must take a year's worth of classes before she graduates. Our curriculum focuses almost entirely on skill classes. We teach archery, sailing, canoeing, tennis and dance, to name a few. We also teach some very instructive courses in first aid and sports medicine. Unfortunately, our courses do not do much for those students who hated their gym classes as children, who were the last ones chosen on their kickball teams in grade school, who somehow had period cramps every week in high school. These students make it through their physical education requirement at Wellesley, but

we do not really reach them. They rarely feel any different about themselves or their bodies upon finishing a course. I hope that the courses we teach in self defense and yoga are exceptions.

We must develop new curriculum to be more sensitive to the needs of women at this point in our history. One course in our new curriculum would be a discussion class on body awareness. Topics of discussion would include how we feel about our bodies; what about our bodies do we like? How have our bodies changed over time, and how did we feel about those changes? What were our reactions to puberty? What were our feelings surrounding the onset of menstruation? What are they now? The questions and discussion topics are innumerable. The focus in this course would be on the student's connection with her body through the awareness of its existence. Presumably, greater awareness would lead to greater appreciation.

An offshoot of this body awareness course would be an exploration of the connections between body and mind. This course could encompass both psychobiology and some philosophic musings. Questions to be posed would include: what is the connection between thinking and feeling, between physical feelings and emotional feelings? How is this connected with spirituality?

Our new curriculum would offer service courses which would include, but not be limited to, first aid, CPR classes. We would offer sex education, self-help examinations, nutrition and stress management. We would reclaim health and hygeine. These courses would educate women about their bodies and in so doing would facilitate women taking control of their bodies.

Of course, our new curriculum would also involve students in physical activities that are positive experiences. We would continue to teach skill courses along with self defense, yoga, conditionning and weight lifting. To these we would add such activities as a ropes course, and hiking, cycling and canoe trips. Basically we want to put our students in a supportive environment, one in which they can work with their bodies and find that their bodies are capable of wondrous things!

As Simone de Beauvoir said, "Let her swim, climb mountain peaks, pilot airplanes, battle against the elements, take risks, go out for adventure, and she will not feel before the world timidity".[14]

I have argued in this paper that the patriarchy has controlled

women's bodies. It has kept women from feeling good about themselves, from feeling their power and strength. The patriarchy has proclaimed women the "weaker" sex and has dominated them so thoroughly that few people stop to question this self-serving pronouncement. Let us ask the question: are women weaker?

In an attempt to answer this question we can approach it in two ways. We can say that what the dominant male ideology has prized are those "strengths which they possess: aggression, domination, an instrumental approach to the world. Equally compelling, perhaps even more compelling, are women's strengths: sharing, caring, an expressive approach to the world. We should work to change the value structure of our society to include more of a woman's approach. And indeed, that is part of what a redefined physical education curriculum should include.

On a physiological level we can say that the dominant male ideology emphasizes strength and speed, which are considered male attributes, over balance and flexibility which are considered female attributes. Again, we need to change society so that women's strengths are valued equally with men's.

The other tack we can take is to question the seemingly unquestionnable. Is it possible that women do not have to be physically weaker, that this notion has been promulgated by the patriarchy? Do we dare question the assumption that women are, by nature, physically inferior to men? Simone de Beauvoir eloquently wrote, "One of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a 'natural' situation since, after all, one cannot revolt against nature".[15]

The moral inferiority of women used to be unquestionnable. From Eve's bite of the apple to Freud's females with their weaker super-egos, women have been regarded as less trustworthy, irrational, immoral beings. Today we feminists pay little heed to such a notion although no doubt vestiges of this belief still linger.

Similarly, women have been assumed to be "naturally" the intellectual inferiors of men. We now question this assumption. We no longer look at the percentage of tenured women in higher education and say, "Women aren't as smart; they just can't make it in academe". No. Now we say, "That's discrimination. Women have been systematically discouraged from

and excluded from many fields of study".

Let us examine the supposed physical inferiority in the same way. Clearly there are physiological differences between men and women. "The average male is 4-5 inches taller, 30-40 pounds heavier, has larger internal organs, and approximately 10 % less body fat than the average female".[16] The average female has a smaller heart and lesser lung capacity. She has a lower maximal oxygen uptake. Females are approximately 60-80 % as strong as males. These differences start to appear at around age 10 - 12 at the onset of puberty with increased levels of testosterone in males.

Don't these statestics speak overwelmingly to the fact that women are physically inferior, that they are indeed naturally weaker, that hormonal changes make this physical inferiority a biological reality? Perhaps, but most of these gender comparison studies have been of "average" men and women. The average man, according to E A E Ferris, is relatively much more active than the average woman.

> What appears to be dramatic biological differences between the sexes in physical attributes and physiological functionning in response to exercise are more related to a difference in life style. Women assume a much more sedentary existence owing to the cultural and societal restrictions placed on them after puberty. It is well-known that a substantial reduction in physical activity results in a deterioration in the basic physiological components of physical fitness; strength, cardiovascular endurance and muscular endurance all diminish and body fat accumulates. It is exactly in these features that the average female differs from the average male. However, comparisons of highly trained male and female athletes revealed more similarities than differences in these physiological parameters.[17]

There is mounting evidence that women are closing the physical performance gap that still exists between themselves and their male counterparts. In cycling, swimming, running, even weight lifting, women are coming closer to the best efforts of men. Linear regressions based on male and female best times in cycling, swimming and running predict that women should be equalling men in these fields within 40 years. Regression curves predict that in the marathon women will be running as fast as men by 1990.[18] In 1970 the women's world record in the marathon was 52 minutes slower than the men's world record. In 1984 it is 14 minutes slower. Mark Spitz's world record for the 400 meter freestyle swim in 1968 was bested 10 years

later by a woman, Tracey Wickham. This is not an especially unusual case. Looking at all swimming events, women are an average of 13 years behind men, and this lag time of how long it takes women to catch up to the best men is falling fast. It is also not uncommon for the best efforts of women in one country to be better than male records in another country. The Austrailian women, for instance, are faster swimmers than New Zealand men.[19]

At the New Agenda Conference a resolution was passed "that single sex competition be maintained in those competitive sports which depend upon speed, strength, power, and/or endurance in post pubertal males and females".[20] Billie Jean King disagreed. She thinks males and females of all ages should compete together. She doesn't know how well she would have done against the men, but she does know that whe would be a better tennis player today if she had competed against them. In the same vein King said, "I look forward to seeing in my lifetime, pigtails in the World Series worn by a woman".[21]

At this point is women's history mixed competition would be a mixed blessing. It would exclude most of those females presently on girls' and women's teams. Since we are striving for increased involvement in physical endeavors on the part of females, the time has not yet come for across the board mixing; too many females would be left out. On the other hand, so much of achievement is expectation, and if women set their sights higher who knows what their capabilities may be.

Imagine a world in which a woman is the one to control her body, in which a woman takes pride in her body, celebrates it; a world in which she does not have to feel herself to be the weaker sex because she is not the weaker sex. Imagine the implications for our society.

Diana Nyad, a long distance swimmer and squash player, addressing the New Agenda conferees said it best: "I stand before you feeling like I own the earth because of 20 years in a sport. That's what we're fighting for - to make sure that everybody out there - every little girl and every high school girl and every 55 year old woman ashamed of her fat could feel like I feel - like I own the world".[22]

Notes

1 "Feeling Fat in a Thin Society", in Glamour, Feb. 1984, p 200.

2 Glamour, p 199.

3 Glamour, p 199.

4 Kim Chernin, The Obsession, Harper-Row, N.Y., 1981, p 31.

5 Chernin, p 41.

6 Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, Complaints and Disorders; The Sexual Politics of Sickness, The Feminist Press, N.Y., 1981, p 31.

7 Ehrenreich and English, p 81.

8 Chernin, p 96.

9 Glamour, p 199.

10 Eva Auchincloss et al ed., "The New Agenda: A Blueprint for the Future of Women's Sports, A Summary", Women's Sports Foundation, San Francisco, 1983, p 11.

11 Milton Honman and Bonnie Parkhouse, Multivariate Considerations in the Selection of Coaches for Female Athletes: A Demographic and Attitudinal Inquiry, 1981.

12 Margaret Hennig and Anne Jardim, The Managerial Woman, Anchor press/ Doubleday, 1977.

13 Auchincloss et al ed., p 11.

14 Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, Knopf, 1952.

15 de Beauvoir.

16 Dorothy Harris, "Physiological Concerns of Women in Sport", The New Agenda Conference, 1983.

17 E A E Ferris, "Attitudes to Women in Sport, Preface Towards a Sociological Theory", in The Female Athlete, of Medicine and Sport, Vol. 15, 1981, p 20.

18 K F Dyer, Challenging the Men, University of Queensland Press, 1982, p 141.

19 Ferris, p 21.

20 Auchincloss et al ed., p 19.

21 Billie Jean King, addressing The New Agenda Conference, 1983.

22 Diana Nyad, addressing the New Agenda Conference, 1983.